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THE RAGTIME SOCIETY

DEDICATED TO THE PRESERVATION OF CLASSICAL RAGTIME

Harry -- it's never too early to start packing for the Bash!

THE 1985 BASH

WHAT: It's a unique event as ragtimers from all over North America and occasionally Europe gather to hear each other, swap music and stories, and enjoy a splendid weekend.

WHEN: October 18, 19, 20, 1985. (Friday evening, Saturday, Sunday)

WHERE: The Cara Inn, 6725 Airport Road, Toronto, Ontario L4W 1E4, Telephone 678-1400 (area code 416). Free parking.

Further details will be included in the next issue. However, the cost of the Bash dinner remains $25.00. What else has remained the same in these inflationary times!

RAGTIME...
UNDER YOUR HAT

FOUNDED 1962
INCORPORATED 1970

THE RAGTIME SOCIETY
INCORPORATED

is a non-profit corporation having the following objects;

To preserve classical ragtime music and to pursue such other activities as shall serve to maintain and develop interest in classical ragtime music and music related thereto.

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From time to time, the Ragtimer has focussed on individuals -- both past and present -- in ragtime. In this issue, Jean and Paul Huling provide a thought-provoking look at David Thomas Roberts, a young man whose ragtime compositions are heard increasingly at gatherings like the Ragtime Bash.

In order not to cut the article by Jean and Paul, we will be carrying in our next issue regular features that were to appear in this one. That includes SOMETHING DOING, the RAG INDEX and our reprint service.

We are very grateful to Jean and Paul for thoughtful articles such as this one, plus their ongoing historical research. Don't hesitate to contact the Ragtimer if you have a similar idea for an article.

We're late with this issue, which explains why we have combined the March-April and May-June publications. Quite soon, we hope, we can be back on a regular schedule.

As the opposite page hints, it's not too soon to make plans to attend the 1985 Bash. We hope to see you there!

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EDITOR'S NOTE

"I freely acknowledge," says DAVID THOMAS ROBERTS in the following article, "that no one on the contemporary scene has appeared whose scope and musicality are comparable to my own."

Jean and Paul Huling, two of David Thomas Roberts's greatest fans, think he may just be right. Here is their assessment of one of the most interesting -- and perhaps controversial -- talents in the current ragtime scene.

I have not cut or edited their scholarly, footnoted manuscript in any way. Thanks, Jean and Paul!

Jack Hutton

Note: The ragtime composition, "Roberto Clemente" by David Thomas Roberts, was played at both the 1982 and 1983 Toronto "Bashes".

David Thomas Roberts: Contemporary Ragtime Composer

by Jean and Paul Huling

Introduction:

About one hundred years ago, ragtime was in its birth period, with Scott Joplin as its "father figure". But, we all know he wasn't alone; many others shared, borrowed, helped, just as ragtime artists do today. The spirit hasn't changed; performers and composers still trade ideas and music.

The era of ragtime is considered to be, in round numbers, from 1890 -1915. But,it never died; there still are people writing ragtime. We must never consider ragtime by date, but as music. Contemporary ragtime can be as important to our lives and spirits as ragtime was to people at the turn of the century.

As David Thomas Roberts played his rags on the piano last June in St. Louis, it was obvious that the audience was divided into two groups, in conflict with each other. The scene was the St. Louis National Festival of Ragtime and Traditional Jazz, and David was playing in the crowded dining room of the showboat "Goldenrod".

One group of audience sat up close to the piano, listening intently to every note; the rest of the people laughed and talked as they enjoyed themselves at dinner. Occasionally, the quiet fans turned around to frown at the noise, and to ask people to be quieter.

Surprisingly, the quiet fans won out over the noisy group. By the end of the set, the majority of people were listening, really listening.

Throughout the conflict, David played one beautiful rag after another, all his own compositions. After each rag was finished, he solemnly announced the next one, with sometimes a brief explanation of how he came to write it; then he hunched over the piano again with his characteristic serious concentration. David's act features no smiles, no banter, no jokes, just excellent contemporary ragtime.

David says of himself, "I freely acknowledge that no one on the contemporary scene has appeared whose scope and musicality

are comparable to my own."[1] Again, he states, "Having written over fifty-five ragtime compositions since 1971, I am the most prolific acknowledged ragtime composer in history."[2]

There are several ways to test what David says, to judge if he is a braggart, or if he really is a composer of exceptional merit. One way is to listen to him play a couple of sets, as in St. Louis, or when he presents a concert of his own works, as he occasionally does.

The other way is to listen to his records: Pinelands Memoir and other Rags,[3] and his latest album, Through the Bottomlands by Stomp Off Records.[4]

Titles of rags such as "Lily Langtry Comes to the Midwest" and "The Early Life of Larry Hoffer" should intrigue some ragtime lovers into testing the worth of the music. Then, there are rags named for places of David's homeland in Mississippi, like "Kreole" (his childhood home-town), "The South Mississippi Glide", "Forrest County" (where he attended the University of Southern Mississippi) and "Hattiesburg Days".

Also, each album has a rag corresponding to its title. "Through the Bottomlands", David says on the cover, "recalls rural isolation, tiny, half-tilled farms bordering swamps, the poverty of families reliant upon sharecropping and meager

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[1] Letter to Hulings, dated April 20, 1984.

[2] Letter to Hulings, dated July 6, 1984.

[3] Pinelands Memoir and other Rags, Vol. 24 in Euphonic's Piano Series, ESR-1224, copyright 1983, Euphonic Sound Recordings.

[4] Through the Bottomlands, Stomp Off Records, SOS,1072; York, Pennsylvania.

vegetable outputs."[1] Of "Pinelands Memoir", the rag for which the other album is titled, David says, "This is the most ambitious piece included here, and is very nearly my most successful ragtime composition." [2] It would be easy to set words to "Pinelands Memoir", for it has an energetic melody running throughout.

Then there are rags of sadness, like "Frederic and the Coast", which is"a momento of the great hurricane that attacked coastal Mississippi, Alabama and Florida on Sept. 12-13, 1979. . . For me it is associated with landscapes of resignation and the tragic peace known to coastlines that have been battered and transformed by their waters." [3]

Another rag describing tragedy has become probably the most played and well-known of David's rags: "Roberto Clemente". Clemente was a rightfielder on the Pittsburgh Pirates baseball team, who died in a tragic plane crash when he was carrying supplies to needy earthquake victims in Central America. David wrote the rag "after seeing the documentary about him shown during the 1979 World Series", and describes "Roberto Clemente" as a "country funeral" and a "folk elegy ".

David feels this sadness in ragtime is "the overarching

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1 Through the Bottomlands , cover notes.

2 Pinelands Memoir , cover notes.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

facet of its personality"[1], and he"recoil(s) at the hickish and demeaning notion that ragtime is primarily a light-hearted genre."[2] Perhaps this explains rags like, "The Girl on the Other Side", whose title is a reference to death. The first strain of this rag is David's version of the mountain tune, "Ragtime Annie." [3]

David Thomas Roberts is a complex and gifted artist, in the broadest sense of the word artist, for he is also a painter and writer. Recently he completed two large paintings, and plans by the end of 1984 to finish a novel, Focus on Phillip Osgood . In his own words, "It should be remembered at all times that I never approach any material with the mindset of a writer, a painter or composer but with the free-wheeling, synesthetic consciousness of all three." [4]

David says his earliest musical experience as a child, "other than perhaps hearing my parents playfully sing to me, consisted of my exposure to rhythm and blues and rock 'n roll from the mid-1950's. I cannot recall a time when I was oblivious to Fats Domino. My love of Fats, from my earliest memories until my fifth year, was synonymous with my love of the piano."[5] He took

1 "Pinelands Memoir", album cover
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Letter to Hulings, dated Oct. 5, 1984
5 Ibid.

piano lessons (or, as he phrased it, "loosely studied with a local teacher") until he became disinterested at age seven. However, he did compose a waltz"which I performed at a recital at age eight." [1]

From ages nine through thirteen, he was more interested in painting and writing than in music. "It was at age fourteen", he declares, "that I decided that I should prepare myself to be a composer. Re-listening to the third movement of Rachmaninoff's 'Piano Concerto # 2 cinched this decision." [2] He first remembers hearing ragtime about 1959[3], and says "it was (josh)Rifkin who brought me back to ragtime in 1971 with his first Joplin LP," [4] although he didn't meet him until 1981.

To explain his varied and prolific writing, David says" Like most composers I get musical ideas at the piano and away from the piano, but most of my work is done before the keyboard whether I'm writing for one instrument or many.. . When working on ragtime, I seldom begin notation until the piece is seemingly finished. . . I am interested in unique encapsulations of extraordinary experiences, objects, events, people and associations which are poetic in their life within me." [5]

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[1] Letter to Hulings, dated Oct. 5, 1984.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Pinelands Memoir', album cover.
[4] Letter to Hulings,dated Oct. 5,1984
[5] Ibid.

His eclectic ragtime pieces have been clearly affected by many composers, among which he lists Franz Schubert, Frederic Chopin, Scott Joplin, Ferdinand Morton, Joseph Lamb, and James Scott. [1] On the cover of his Pinelands album, he says, "My influences have been quite varied;Hymns, Romantic music, Latin-American sources, popular tunes, and American rural music of many types have informed my rag world." [2] Presently he is working on a seventeen-section suite called New Orleans Streets , in which he says , there are, "at every turn, Latin elements of every type (which I view as the natural property of composers from the tango belt."[3]

David further states that "The attitude of ragtime is uniquely Romantic"4. Clearly typical of Schubert are the sudden brightenings in David's rags, when he switches from minor to major, and the lyricism in his melodies. His harmonies owe much to Chopin.

Speaking of his association with folk ragtime, he says, "I have been over-identified with folk ragtime,

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1 Letter to Hulings, July 6, 1984

2 Pinelands Memoir , album cover.

3 Letter to Hulings, Oct. 5, 1984

4 Through the Bottomlands , album cover.

though folk ragtime as a collective form has had an impact on a good deal of my work. Folk rag figures as diverse as Charles Hunter, Brun Campball, Tom Shea, Trebor Tichener, and John Hancock have made significant impressions on me." [1]

To explain why he composes ragtime, David asks, "Why is the composing of ragtime a component in my string of necessities? Because I perceive too much inventiveness, musicality and sheer love in the medium for it to be otherwise . . . I need it because of its insistent intimacy, because it affected me in early childhood as did nothing else, because it possesses a very particular poignancy that finds no other outlet." [2]

David's music has attracted admirers over the years. Those pianists lucky enough to have a copy of a Roberts rag usually find themselves squinting at a hand-written manuscript, covered with tiny, tightly-written notes. (One young ragtimer wrote us to say, "David really should publish his rags."[3]) David has definite ideas about how his rags should be played, and often offers detailed advice to those performing them.

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[1] Letter to Hulings, dated July 6, 1984

[2] Through the Bottomlands, album cover.

[3] Letter to Hulings from Alvin Wong.

"I freely acknowledge", David wrote, "that no one on the contemporary scene has appeared whose scope and musicality are comparable to my own." [1] There is only one way to judge the importance of his contribution to ragtime, and that is, to listen to it. David Thomas Roberts says preposterous and egotistical things about himself - - preposterous and egotistical, that is, unless they are true.

In the long run, history will decide. But for now, we can join the group that judged his abilities, the group that listened.

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[1] Letter to Hulings, July 6, 1984

JEAN AND PAUL HULING, well-known to ragtime fans as Sister Jean, the Ragtime Queen, and Laundry Fat, wrote the foregoing article on David Thomas Roberts in 1984. Their most recent article for the Ragtimer, which looked at Irene Giblin, was reprinted elsewhere after it appeared here. Keep on writing, Jean and Paul!

For the second year in a row -- or is it the third? -- I am combining the March-April and May-June issues into one. Time pressures have made it impossible to find even one day to put the material together. Several months ago, some unusual circumstances turned my six-day-a-week day job into seven (and sometimes eight) days a week. My excuses, however, are simply not good enough when I consider that many Society members have only this publication as their direct link to the organization.

I am midway through my fifth year as your Editor and have enjoyed every minute of it, particularly getting to know many of you through correspondence. However, I believe that you deserve someone who can guarantee a more consistent schedule of publication without the gaps that my eccentric workload creates from time to time. Therefore, I should tell you that I have discussed with your Society directors stepping down as Editor so that someone else with a more flexible timetable can take over this role.

We'll see what arises from the discussions, but I certainly won't stop writing, regardless of what happens. I hope to keep on snapping pictures like the scene at the Primrose (Ragtime) Cafe below to share with you, and I am midway through research on several subjects, including the Canadian who dazzled a generation with his novelty ragtime technique (Willie Eckstein, the first solo pianist to record "The Maple Leaf Rag").

I apologize to all for the lateness of this combined issue. Jack Lawton

How many times have you run across a ragtime cafe in a quiet rural town or village? Well, you're looking at one -- the Primrose Cafe where Bill and Mary Anne West offer the Ragtimer as reading material to the guests in their Bruce Peninsula tea room roughly 100 miles northwest of Metropolitan Toronto.

One of the frequent guests is fellow Ragtime Society member Virginia Kierans who has a summer home with husband Jon just outside Durham, the location of the Primrose Cafe. That's Virginia with her arm around Bill's shoulder.

There is even a piano with several folios of favorite tunes. If you're travelling through Central Ontario, look up Durham on the map and visit Bill and Mary Ann any day except Sunday.

A RAGTIMER'S DELIGHT IN NEW YORK

By Jack Hutton

Any Ragtime Society member who enjoys poking through old sheet music should make it a point to visit the Music Exchange on 46th Avenue two or three blocks east of Broadway during any visit to New York City. Hang onto this issue of the Ragtimer, however, because the existence of the Music Exchange, hidden 10 floors above the New York pavement, is one of the city's best-kept secrets.

I discovered it during a recent trip to New York only because Dick Hyman had praised the Exchange in his Keyboard magazine column, providing the Manhattan address (151 West 46th Street, 10th floor). Even with those directions, I was still bewildered because nothing at street level lists the Music Exchange.

HERBERT HURWITZ

"Oh, it's somewhere on 46th. The south side, I think," a salesman at the Colony Record Store told me (the Colony is another must stop for New York visitors; we must publish a Ragtime Guide to New York some time).

After staring at south side addresses for some time, I looked north during my third attempt and spotted a doorway sign that read: PROFESSIONAL MUSIC BUILDING. Peeking inside, I found the Music Exchange listed on the wall. Three minutes later, I was talking to owner Herbert Hurwitz, which is worth the visit all by itself.

"You read about us in Dick's column? Wish he'd drop in here again soon. I've got a couple of questions I want to ask him."

Herbert Hurwitz's face lit up when I mentioned the Ragtime Society. "Say, do you know David Jasen? This is where he gets a lot of his stuff." I was then shown to two giant pull-out files marked "Novelty Piano", around the corner from the display bins that most customers see.

"Be my guest. Take as long as you want. But I'll warn you -- David Jasen goes through that pretty regularly."

One glance told me that one visit wouldn't offer enough time. With permission from wife Cindy ("You go to Sak's, I'll go look at this music store"), I returned the following day to see what David Jasen had left behind.

Ninety minutes or so later, I had a small pile of music that fell into several categories -- genuine finds, replacements for long-lost music, new folios I hadn't seen yet, and others that fell into the loose category of "why-not-give-it-a-try?" In the first category, I had been looking for years for a copy of "Ragging the Scale" by Edward Claypoole, the Baltimore pianist who literally turned the scale into ragtime in 1915, ("Ragging" sold more than two million copies of sheet music in the U.S. and Europe). I seized upon a tattered original copy of Herb Nacio Brown's "Doll Dance" (which I'll probably frame) and a two-piano version of the same. Readers might consider me eccentric, however, for picking up Emerson Whithorne's "New York Days and Nights: Times Square" (who is Emerson Whitmore? I don't know), "The Deserted Patio" by Frank Perkins, plus two(!) solo versions of "Down South" by William H. Myddleton. On the other hand, there were original versions of "Marilyn" and "Dolly Dimples" by Louis Alter, both copies in excellent condition.

One doesn't plunge into the Music Exchange's stock with a fixed idea of finding one or two tunes, I discovered. I had hoped, for instance, that a copy of Eubie's "Blue Thoughts" might be lurking in a New York music store. No such luck. But it was a joy to look through aging sheet music that had obviously graced someone else's piano bench before finding its way to 46th Avenue. It was also a pleasure to see new folios that my Toronto stores hadn't stocked yet, notably Dick Zimmerman's "Three Ragtime Songs" (three "coon songs" which Dick believes were arranged by Scott Joplin; my favorite is "Snoring Sampson -- a Quarrel in Ragtime"; the folio is published by Belwin-Mills Publishing Corp.)

"Glad to see you found something you liked," the owner beamed. "You never know what you'll find back there. Dick Hyman, David Jasen, John Arpin -- they all come through here."

It's obvious that Herbert Hurwitz enjoys what he has been doing for more than 40 years: helping people make contact with music of all kinds, but particularly piano. He'll be delighted to see you if you tell him that you are a member of the Ragtime Society. The 10th floor mid-Manhattan location is now a regular stop for me on any future New York visit because who knows? I may just find "Blue Thoughts" waiting for me one day.

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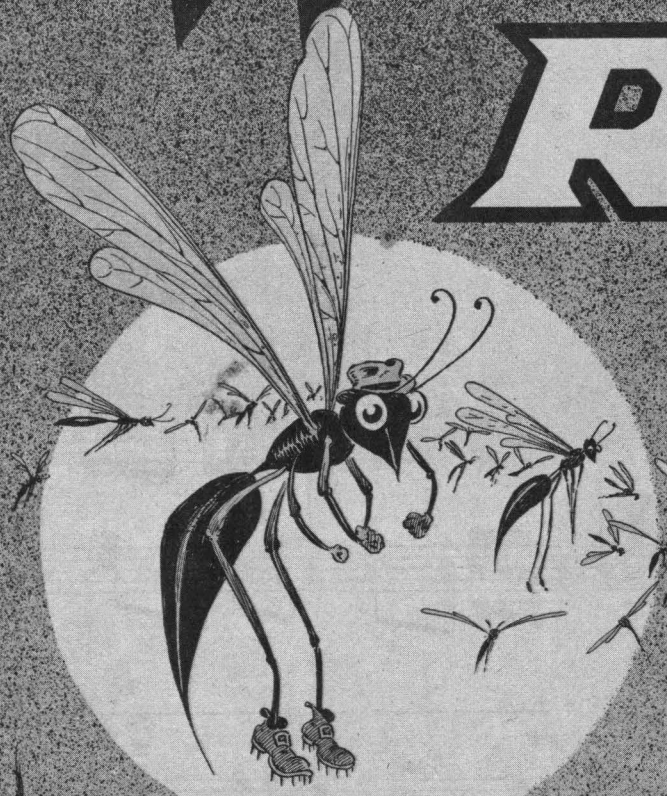

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